

Political Participation in Kharkiv: Gendered Wartime Changes and Opportunities

Policy Brief by Niklas Balbon

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Introduction

When Russia began its full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, large parts of Kharkiv Oblast became some of the first areas of Ukraine to be occupied by Russian troops. Since then, the Ukrainian Armed Forces have liberated most of the oblast's territory.¹ However, the war continues to shape many aspects of everyday life, including political participation, which in turn shapes who gets to weigh in on critical political choices about defense, resilience and reconstruction.

Feminist research shows that changes in political participation during and after a war have a strong gender dimension.² In the Ukrainian context, however, research on the war's gendered implications for political participation is sparse,³ thus limiting the possibilities for emancipative counteraction. Therefore, this policy brief examines changes in the gender distribution of political participation and power in Kharkiv Oblast since the beginning of the full-scale invasion. Such knowledge is crucial for informing better policies to fight against women's subordination in politics. It is particularly relevant for international actors who, despite their growing influence on the resilience and reconstruction of Ukraine, have so far not paid sufficient attention to this issue. This policy brief provides initial ideas and recommendations for the kinds of outreach that international actors can establish to support women politicians in Kharkiv Oblast.

To compile this policy brief, I conducted online interviews with scholars, activists and politicians from Kharkiv Oblast in June, July and August 2023. At times, this approach proved to be difficult because of the challenges that the war continuously poses for potential interviewees. In particular, potential interview partners warned me that they might ultimately be unavailable for interviews due to a war-induced lack of time or psychological hardship, which interview situations can exacerbate. Accordingly, I needed an alternative research strategy to supplement my interview findings. This was achieved by sending a set of written, open-ended questions to women politicians and scholars that could be answered at their convenience. In addition, I spoke to colleagues from Kharkiv, who graciously shared their research insights with me.

This policy brief continues as follows: First, I describe the political system of Kharkiv Oblast and the different forms of political participation exercised therein. Then, I detail the changes in patterns of political participation among genders since the beginning of the full-scale invasion, as well as the obstacles that these changes pose. Finally, I discuss policy recommendations for international actors that propose establishing dialogue and capacity-building programs with women politicians, local (feminist) civil society and NGOs.

¹ Institute for the Study of War, "Story Maps," ArcGIS Story Maps, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://storymaps.arcgis.com/stories/733fe90805894bfc8562d90b106aa895>.

² Shelli Israelsen, "Women in Charge: The Effect of Rebel Governance and Women's Organisations on Karen Women's Political Participation," *Civil Wars* 20, no. 3 (2018): 379–407, DOI:10.1080/13698249.2018.1497315.; Niklas Balbon, "Why Do People Hate You, Mommy?: Militarized Masculinities and Women in Postwar Kosovar Politics," *Journal of Women, Politics & Policy* (2023), DOI:10.1080/1554477X.2023.2214475.

³ So far, only very general analyses at the national level have been conducted. For example: UN Women, "Rapid gender analysis of Ukraine: Secondary Data Review (2022)," accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2022/04/rapid-gender-analysis-of-ukraine-secondary-data-review>.

Political Participation in Kharkiv: A Spectrum

Before analyzing the impact of the war on women’s political participation in Kharkiv, it is essential to differentiate between various modes of political participation. Differences can be observed along two dimensions: the level of political participation (national, regional, local) and the degree of formality. To visualize the latter, it helps to arrange different forms of political participation on a spectrum reaching from the most formalized to the least formalized (see Figure 1).⁴ Analyzing changes along these two dimensions is necessary because interviewees indicated that the war does not affect all forms of political participation equally. This means that women are winning political power in some forms of participation but losing it in others. Additionally, this sort of analysis allows us to ask whether women can move between different modes of participation (political mobility). This is a highly relevant question as political power is distributed unequally between various forms of participation, making political mobility a necessity for sustainable development towards greater gender equality.

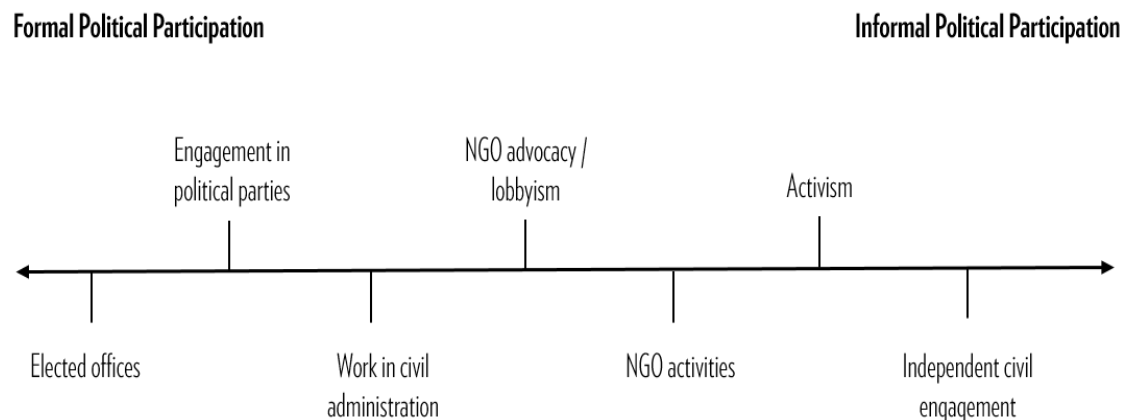


Illustration inspired by Koens and Gunawardana.⁵

Regarding the different levels of political participation, it must be considered that Kharkiv Oblast has a multi-level governance structure. At the executive level, the oblast is governed by the Kharkiv Regional State Administration, headed by the governor, Oleh Syniehubov. After the beginning of the full-scale invasion, a civil-military administration was erected. It comprises administrative staff from the Kharkiv Regional State Administration and the military and is also headed by Syniehubov.⁶ The legislative authority in Kharkiv Oblast is vested in the Kharkiv Regional Council, which was last elected in 2020 for a five-year term. The council is responsible for adopting local legislation, approving the oblast’s budget and supervising the activities of the regional administration. On the local level, formal political participation is exercised by paid and

⁴ Celeste Koens and Samantha J. Gunawardana, “A Continuum of Participation: Rethinking Tamil Women’s Political Participation and Agency in Post-War Sri Lanka,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 23, no. 3 (2021): 463–484, DOI:10.1080/14616742.2020.1734043; Joakim Ekman and Erik Amná, “Political Participation and Civic Engagement: Towards a New Typology,” *Human Affairs* 22, no. 3 (2012): 283–300, DOI:10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1.

⁵ Celeste Koens and Samantha J. Gunawardana, “A Continuum of Participation: Rethinking Tamil Women’s Political Participation and Agency in Post-War Sri Lanka.”

⁶ Oleh Syniehubov, interview with UkrInform, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.ukrinform.de/rubric-ato/3736077-oleh-syniehubov-leiter-der-militarverwaltung-der-oblast-charkiw.html>.

unpaid elected officials (e.g., mayors) and by employees of regional and local administrations. Meanwhile, we can also observe that political participation also takes place through a variety of informal means such as activism, NGO work and independent civil engagement.

Changes in Women’s Political Participation

Simply put, the war causes changes in multiple directions. Women lose and win political power, depending on the form and level of their political participation as well as the geographical context. The latter is an important caveat, as Kharkiv Oblast spans areas both close to and far from the frontline. Some of these areas are still occupied by the Russian Federation, others were liberated in 2022 and others yet have never been occupied. This means there is considerable local variation regarding the consequences of the war,⁷ which has different effects on political participation. Nevertheless, the following trends can be identified in terms of changes in political participation:

High-Level Political Participation

The war and the establishment of the civil-military administration are further consolidating political power in the hands of elite men. This happens as decision-making processes are streamlined by reducing public hearings and consultations with civil society. Additionally, the declaration of martial law redistributes decision-making power to the civil-military administrations, which overwhelmingly consist of men.⁸ Accordingly, we can observe an increased bias in the gendered distribution of political power.

Concerning elected offices, it remains to be seen whether women will increase their share during or after the war, as the last regional elections in Ukraine were conducted only 16 months before the full-scale invasion. It is therefore too early to judge if the war will impact women’s electoral success.

Local Decision-Making

In contrast to high-level decision-making, there is already an observable uptick in women’s participation in local politics. Women have become more active in local politics by working in local administrations or volunteering in local political offices.⁹ As depicted by interviewees, the war both created the opportunity for this development and made it necessary. The war’s detrimental effect on the everyday life of Ukrainians means that they must engage politically to cope with war-induced challenges. At the same time, military mobilization draws more men than women away from civilian – and therefore political – life. Paired with many women’s aspirations to take over political responsibility, this helps explain women’s increased political participation on the local level.¹⁰ A female mayor from

⁷ APACS, “Ukraine: Humanitarian situation in newly accessible areas of Kharkiv oblast,” October 6, 2022, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/acaps-thematic-report-ukraine-humanitarian-situation-newly-accessible-areas-kharkiv-oblast-06-october-2022>.

⁸ Interviews with a gender researcher and a feminist activist.

⁹ Written interview responses by women politicians and political scholars.

¹⁰ Interviews with a gender researcher, feminist activist and politician.

Kharkiv Oblast summarizes this development as follows:

The role of women in politics, public life, at work, raising children, and anywhere else increased, as did their responsibility. Women are more actively entering the public space, engaging in volunteer activities, and defending their homeland. All these actions are impossible without making important decisions.

NGO Work and Volunteering

Beyond the forms of formal political participation mentioned above, many interviewees cited work at NGOs and independent humanitarian volunteering as forms of political participation that have increased during the war.¹¹ This might be a surprise, as it could be argued that humanitarian action does not equal political participation. However, in a hostile, war-torn environment, providing services otherwise guaranteed by the state can be seen as a political act. As much as it aspires to be apolitical, humanitarian action results in fundamentally political choices – like who gets fed or sheltered first, whose power or water is restored first, and whose voice counts in assessing needs. It is, therefore, a core part of the political equation in all conflict settings.¹²

Beyond their work for NGOs and other humanitarian institutions, women form the backbone of independent humanitarian volunteering.¹³ As such, they organize the distribution of goods, housing for IDPs, evacuations of the vulnerable, and more. A local feminist activist described this as follows:

Women took on new duties and responsibilities, such as assisting in humanitarian efforts and protecting their families and communities. They have proven that they can fulfill a variety of roles, including medical personnel, volunteers, advocates, and community leaders.

Crucially, most of these operations are conducted independently from the government or NGOs. This means volunteers self-organize the fundraising, allocation and distribution of humanitarian goods. Figure 2 outlines how many of these operations work.

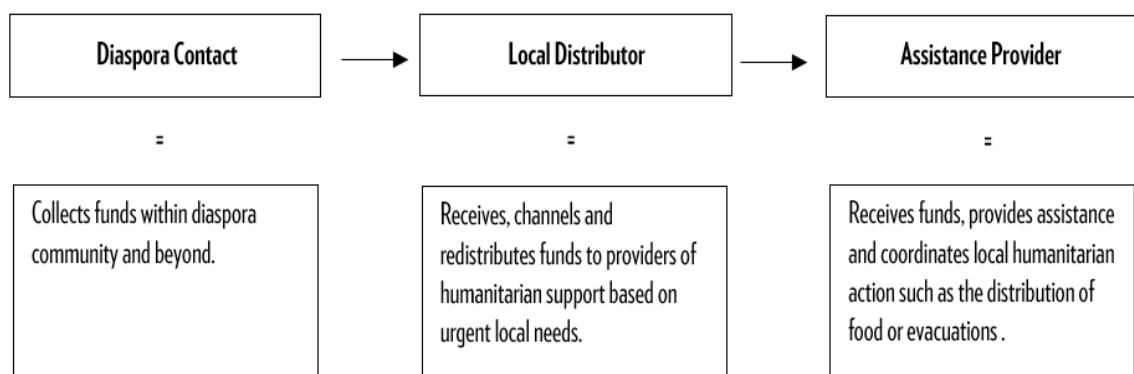


Illustration based on interview findings.

¹¹ Written interview-responses by women politicians and political scholars; interview with a humanitarian volunteer.

¹² Jennifer M. Welsh, "Introduction," in Jennifer M. Welsh (ed.), *Humanitarian Intervention and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), accessed July 18, 2023, DOI:[10.1093/0199267219.003.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/0199267219.003.0001).

¹³ Interviews with gender researchers and a feminist activist; written interview responses by women politicians and political scholars.

Challenges: Biases, Gatekeepers and Backlash

Lack of Participatory Mobility

Even though we can observe an overall increase in the political participation of women, there is also an evident lack of mobility between different types of political participation. In particular, informal, grassroots-level participation has not yet translated into formalized participation in higher positions of power. While some interviewees voiced optimism that women will be able to move from informal to formal political participation, others voiced the fear that the current political elite will undermine such a transition.¹⁴ As one female politician put it:

Let's face reality: our political system is patriarchal and many of the people who work in it do not like that women now have more responsibility. They may accept it momentarily because of the war, but I think it is fair to assume that they will want to have their privileges back, once the war is over. We can see such pushback now already.

Within formal political structures, party officials and members of the civil administration were often described as powerful gatekeepers who can make or break political careers.¹⁵ Accordingly, a lack of support from these gatekeepers compounds the participatory immobility, which – if left untouched – will likely sustain inequalities in the distribution of political power.

The Precarity of Politically Active Women

Many women volunteers who make crucial contributions to the survival and resilience of their communities themselves live in precarious economic situations.

Despite the previously mentioned redistribution of political and humanitarian responsibilities, many interviewees and respondents raised concerns about the precarity of women who engage politically. This precarity results from the simple fact that much (if not most) of the wartime engagement of women is unpaid despite being labor- and time-intensive. This is particularly true for the kind of volunteering work described in the preceding section.¹⁶

As interviewees pointed out, women are more likely than men to provide unpaid work for their community because patriarchy socializes women to provide care work without remuneration.¹⁷ For the same reason, uncompensated care work by women is less likely to be perceived as a political problem by the general public.¹⁸ The

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Interviews with gender researchers and a feminist activist; written interview responses by women politicians and political scholars.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Interview with a political science researcher.

¹⁸ Susan Himmelweit and Ania Plomien, "Feminist perspectives on care: theory, practice and policy," in *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Mary Evans, Hazel Johnstone, Marsha Henry, and Clare Hemmings (London: SAGE Publications), accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.torrossa.com/en/resources/an/5018745#page=473>.

consequences are currently visible in Ukraine: many women volunteers who make crucial contributions to the survival and resilience of their communities themselves live in precarious economic situations. A feminist activist from Kharkiv commented on this situation:

Every single person in Ukraine is impacted by the war. But it is also true that our reactions to the war are gendered. I think that women are much more prone to self-exploitation simply because society teaches us every day that we have to care for the family for free anyway. Free work by women is completely normalized. And this does not change just because we are in war.

The widespread precarity of women's engagement does not only lead to individual suffering, but it is also potentially detrimental to the sustainability of women's political engagement. This is because poverty weakens women's material capabilities and their motivation to participate in politics.¹⁹

Sustainability of Engagement

The question of whether women's political participation is sustainable is particularly significant with a view to the future and to reconstruction. Historically, in many instances of conflict, there has been a notable increase in women's political participation during wartime, only to be subsequently followed by a "gender backlash." This ultimately leads to women being marginalized in decision-making processes once hostilities have ceased.²⁰

Avoiding a gender backlash should therefore be treated as a policy priority in Ukraine. Fortunately, there is evidence from other conflicts that women's wartime political engagement can result in the acquisition of "conflict capital," which refers to skills, experiences, networks, and social connections developed during conflict that become personal and collective assets in post-war contexts.²¹ These resources can serve as a foundation for future engagement and access to decision-making; their collection can also be gendered.²² In Ukraine, the fact that many women are currently learning how to lead and participate politically may benefit them and their peers in the future. This hope is also shared by one of the politically active interviewees:

Men can try to become more dominant in the future again, but they can not take away the experiences that we have had. We have learned a lot and become stronger in many ways. So while I am worried about the future, I also think that we have a foundation to build upon.

However, the widespread occurrence of gender backlash after past wars serves as a warning sign that gendered conflict capital alone will not suffice to sustain women's political engagement after war. For this reason, women must receive support now to solidify the foundation for sustainable participatory equality.

¹⁹ Åshild Falch, "Women's Political Participation and Influence in Post-Conflict Burundi and Nepal," PRIO Paper, May 2010, accessed July 13, 2023, <https://www.prio.org/publications/7259>; written interview-responses by women politicians and political scholars.

²⁰ Jane L. Parpart, "Militarized masculinities, heroes and gender inequality during and after the nationalist struggle in Zimbabwe," *NORMA* 10, no. 3-4 (2015): 312-325, DOI:10.1080/18902138.2015.1110434; Sheila Meintjes, Anu Pillay, and Meredith Turshen, *The Aftermath: Women in Post-Conflict Transformation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2001).

²¹ Christine Cheng, *Extralegal Groups in Post-Conflict Liberia: How Trade Makes the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/extralegal-groups-in-post-conflict-liberia-9780199673346?cc=de&lang=en&>.

²² Balbon, "Why Do People Hate You, Mommy?" Militarized Masculinities and Women in Postwar Kosovar Politics."

Recommendations

As shown above, we can observe an overall trend towards greater political participation of women in Kharkiv Oblast. However, it has also become clear that women's political participation varies greatly depending on the precise location, level and context. Simply put, some women are winning, while others are losing. This is further complicated by an evident lack of political mobility, which creates barriers for women to reach positions of power and move upwards in the political "chain." Against this backdrop, international actors operating in Ukraine (foreign governments, international institutions, INGOs) should start to implement policies aimed at promoting the sustainable political participation of women both during war and beyond.

The international community should see their engagement as a chance to amplify women's pre-existing agency by providing a platform that encourages mutual learning and organizing.

The political participation of women is a topic that gets close to the heart of Ukrainian democracy. As such, international actors must find the delicate balance between promoting women's participation and respecting the independence of Ukraine's democratic institutions and customs. Accordingly, I suggest that the most promising avenue for international engagement is to support women in politics through outreach and capacity-building activities. However, it must be underlined that international actors must be careful not to follow a paternalistic approach of "teaching" Ukrainian women how to be better politicians. Instead, the international community should see their engagement as a chance to amplify women's pre-existing agency by providing a platform that encourages mutual learning and organizing. In more detail, the activities of international actors should aim to fulfill the following goals:

- **Encouraging connections.** There is an apparent lack of networks between politically active women in Kharkiv Oblast, which reduces individual and collective capabilities to acquire political power.²³ To foster mutual learning, knowledge exchange and capacity building, politically active women should be invited to connect and form coalitions.
- **Engaging gatekeepers.** Powerful gatekeepers in administrations and political parties often limit opportunities for women's political mobility. This requires greater engagement with current political elites to demonstrate the necessity and benefits of opening positions of power to women.
- **Demonstrating international solidarity.** Connections between women politicians, feminist civil society and international actors are sparse. Intensifying outreach is a powerful tool to strengthen the morale of women politicians, build capacity and signal to national political elites that participatory equality is a priority of the international community.

To achieve these goals, the following activities are recommended:

1. **Analysis.** Outreach activities should be based on a thorough analysis of politically active women in Kharkiv Oblast across the whole spectrum of participation. As different groups of active women operate with varying levels of visibility, this sort of granular analysis will require fieldwork. This

²³ Interviews with gender researchers and a feminist activist; written interview-responses by women politicians and political scholars.

also means that a “quick fix” or a “rapid analysis” likely will not suffice to arrive at a sufficiently detailed picture of the political realities on the ground.

2. **Outreach.** Once politically active women are identified, two formats of outreach should be combined:

(1) **Peer Outreach:** networking and debating events for women across the participatory spectrum to exchange their knowledge and experiences in politics. Participants should exclusively be politically active women to create a safe space that allows for open and vulnerable conversations. This could be organized in cooperation with a local feminist civil society organization to increase local legitimacy and encourage participants to solidarize with one another.

(2) **External Outreach:** networking and debating events with politically active women, political gatekeepers and key stakeholders. These stakeholders include:

- i. Party officials, as political parties often represent the biggest gatekeeper for women in politics.²⁴
- ii. Administrative officials, as there remains limited mobility in unelected, administrative, political institutions.
- iii. International actors, in order to exchange ideas on how they can use their leverage to advocate for the inclusion of women in politics.

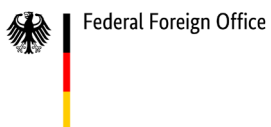
To ensure that the abovementioned outreach formats yield the desired results, implementers should adhere to the following principles:

1. **Consistency.** A one-time consultation will likely be dismissed as performative support. Establishing trust and legitimacy among participants is a precondition for impact. It will thus be necessary to conduct consultations across consistent intervals.
2. **Remuneration.** As detailed above, politically active women often do not expect compensation for their engagement due to the gendered social norms around care work. However, the lack of financial resources is a significant pitfall for women’s political participation, especially in war and postwar contexts.²⁵ To avoid adding to the problem, international actors should remunerate women for their participation in consultations.
3. **Conflict-sensitivity.** The war can impose a significant psychological strain on potential participants. This means that consultations should be conducted in a conflict-sensitive manner, to further increase trust and reduce the chances of re-traumatization participants. This is particularly important when discussing sensitive topics like sexualized violence.

²⁴ Lisa Kindervater and Sheila Meintjes, “Gender and Governance in Post-Conflict and Democratizing Settings,” in Fionnuala Ní Aoláin et al. (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Gender and Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), DOI:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199300983.013.37.

²⁵ Falch, “Women’s Political Participation and Influence in Post-Conflict Burundi and Nepal.”

4. **Intersectionality.** When designing outreach programs, other forms of marginalization beyond gender must be considered. This means actively searching for and including women from minority groups, women with disabilities or women with other intersectional vulnerabilities.
5. **Promotion.** Many interviewees expressed that while a vibrant feminist civil society exists in Ukraine, feminist objectives are often dismissed by civil servants and politicians in positions of power. International actors should use consultations to listen to the needs of women and use their leverage with Ukrainian decision-makers to advocate for changes accordingly.



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